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SUBJECT: UKRAINE: YUSHCHENKO'S MARCH 14 remarks ON FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS

REF: KIEV 978

¶1. (U) Summary: On March 14, shortly after the Rada (parliament) had passed a series of amendments designed to address technical problems regarding the administration of the March 26 elections (reftel), President Yushchenko held a press-conference devoted to the election campaign and the domestic situation in Ukraine. He opened with a statement on free and fair elections that stressed that the 2006 election cycle was the freest and fairest in Ukraine's history and vowed that problems with the functioning of polling station commissions would be addressed. He also highlighted the positive contributions civic organizations like the Committee of Voters of Ukraine (CVU) made to the democratic process. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In his opening remarks, Yushchenko said that Ukraine as a nation was focused on implementation of a task that it had not successfully tackled for the last 15 years: guaranteeing free and fair elections. Although society had not yet developed coherent criteria to evaluate the fairness of the process, it was clear that transparent public policy, freedom of speech, rule of law, and democracy would attest to Ukraine's progress.

¶3. (U) Yushchenko reminded listeners that in past elections, Ukrainian authorities had resorted to voting process manipulations and voter lists had been inaccurate. He maintained that the new government had checked the lists used in 2004 and identified 1.4 million people whose names were listed on voter lists but did not exist. Currently, the number of these so-called "dead souls" had been reduced to 840 thousand. Yushchenko acknowledged that 10,000 (of the approximately 33,000) polling station commissions (PSCs) were not yet fully staffed and that across the country there was a shortage of 20,000 ballot boxes, but he vowed these problems would be resolved.

¶4. (U) Yushchenko said that he as President would personally ensure that the Cabinet of Ministers fully financed the election campaign. In some areas, only 70 percent of designated funds had been received; in others, only 50 percent. Yushchenko added that some local authorities had used authorized election funds for other purposes. Yushchenko expressed hope that the necessary amendments to the 2006 Budget would be adopted to guarantee adequate funding of the election campaign. (Note: The Rada had already passed such amendments by time Yushchenko spoke; the bill awaits Yushchenko's signature.)

¶5. (U) Yushchenko noted that in the past, political parties had not been able to freely conduct their election campaigns; only pro-presidential forces had been able to place their advertising materials with the media. In contrast, at present, all parties could campaign freely; the

streets in Keiv and other cities were covered with various campaign colors. The opposition enjoyed free access to the media. Yushchenko stressed that his goal as President was to guarantee equal access to the mass media to all political parties.

¶6. (U) Highlighting the role of non-governmental actors, Yushchenko pledged to carefully study the reports of the [non-partisan, pro-democracy NGO] Committee of Voters of Ukraine and the President's Public Committee. Until now, he added, their reports had not provided evidence of serious violations of electoral legislation.

¶7. (U) Yushchenko concluded his introductory statement saying he was optimistic about Ukraine's level of readiness for the March 26 elections. (Note: Yushchenko's statement in Ukrainian is on the web at:

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